

WHY DIDN'T THEY TEACH THAT? THE UNTOLD BLACK HISTORY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

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Black historians matter! In 2017, after the University of New Brunswick (UNB) hosted Dr. Charmaine Nelson, a Black art historian, she encouraged me to pursue academic recognition and credentials for the research I had been doing for years on Black history in the Maritime provinces. At the time, I assumed she was being supportive of an aspiring Black historian, notwithstanding her emphatic injunction that more Black historians need to sift through the surviving sources and assemble a more complete picture of Black history in Canada. I now appreciate the need for brown eyes studying Black history with the inherent and substantial advantage over our White colleagues in that most of us have experienced what W.E.B. Dubois calls the “double consciousness.”¹ Dubois explains how Black people experience a double identity, one defined by the Black cultural experience and a second identity defined by the White power structure, which perpetuates age-old stereotypes and props up White chauvinism as reality. The struggle that Black historians face is to convince the wider society that this “double narrative” exists. Despite evidence to the contrary, those indoctrinated into and benefitting from the White colonial narrative miss the other consciousness and tend to see people of colour as recipients of White benevolence, specifically the benefits resulting from the Anglo-Saxon ascent to global primacy.

This narrative, of course, only makes sense when cleansed of any blemishes, no matter how historically significant these stains might be to the broader historical context. I will not belabour this point beyond a single example. Until recently, the argument that relegated the role of slavery to a tertiary cause in precipitating the American Civil War seemed to be a valid matter of opinion. Two interpretative narratives have predominated: the North invaded the South to free the slaves, or the South seceded from the Union to preserve states' rights.² Both of these accounts are oversimplified and thus incomplete and by turns incorrect interpretations of the nature and sources of the incompatible relationship between the Southern slave states and the Northern anti-slavery states.

In Canada, we feel disconnected from this story in terms of our own history. To distance ourselves from and inoculate ourselves against that American ugliness, we have expunged the racialized aspects of our history, and as a consequence we purged Black history from public discussion for the sake of avoiding conflict. That distancing and inoculation held until the international outcry over the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd by police, and the attempted cover-ups by authorities. Those incidents forced Canadians to confront the imbalance of power that Black people face when dealing with White institutions of authority.³ This tragic sequence of state-sanctioned violence has resulted in two worldviews colliding and a chance for expanded horizons for those willing to take that journey.

An unexpected fault line in historical understanding has emerged in the recent decision by Quaker Oats to rebrand their Aunt Jemima line of pancake mix and syrup and their perverse veneration of the emancipated Kentucky slave woman named Nancy Green, who first played Aunt Jemima for a public that could not get enough of happy tales of slave life. The outcry against Quaker Oats among White New Brunswickers has been noteworthy. The idea that Aunt Jemima was an “innocent image of a kindly Black woman” allows the racist parts of New Brunswick's past to remain hidden: a past that challenges an imagined era of happy slaves. Aunt Jemima represents a collective amnesia over

nineteenth-century Black history that has been replaced by a sort of myth-making and affectation over a fictitious Black woman who personified the Jim Crow era minstrels. Aunt Jemima represents the idea that the proper role of Black women in society is to support White women in providing a wholesome home to their families; Aunt Jemima helps by providing a pancake mix but remaining safely distanced.⁴

Ironically, Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben are better known to New Brunswickers than many notable Black New Brunswickers. They remain little remembered, leaving local Black ties to the Atlantic world's major historical events absent from the public historical narrative. What has persisted with little critical examination are vestiges of White supremacy promoted by early settler social commentary.⁵ This essay attempts to elevate the discussion of New Brunswick Black history above honouring fictitious iconography and instead to identify several Black New Brunswickers who were on the cusp of dramatic changes in what it meant to be Black in British North America. Images like Aunt Jemima were far from innocent, and were in fact attempts to undo years of social progress and put Black people back on the plantation.

It seems fitting we contrast the fictitious Jemima with a real heroine, Nancy Morton. Morton was the plaintiff in the 1800 trial often referred to as the "Nancy trial" that challenged the validity of slavery in New Brunswick.⁶ Though ultimately unsuccessful, the history of Nancy's bid for freedom provides an opportunity to challenge the victim narrative. Nancy's case was not unique in the Atlantic world, but one in a long tradition of Black petitions for freedom and for an acknowledgement that natural rights applied to all people, including those of African descent. This practice of petitioning led back into Nova Scotia, the Thirteen Colonies, the Caribbean, and ultimately to Black fugitive James Somerset who challenged the validity of his enslavement in the 1772 Somerset case in Great Britain.⁷

The *Somerset v Stewart* case launched Granville Sharp's career as the leading abolitionist in Britain, and would see his proteges credited with the establishment of the Black settlement in Sierra Leone.⁸ What remains little recognized is the earliest work organizing the Black émigrés and the tireless petitioning of the British government by Black Loyalist Thomas Peters, who travelled between New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and England.⁹ Equally neglected are the New Brunswick religious leaders like Methodist Henry Beverhout and sometime New Brunswick resident David George. George is virtually unknown outside of the Black community, but was a founding father of the Baptist Church in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, established the first African Baptist Church in the United States, and founded the Baptist Church in Sierra Leone.¹⁰

Recently, UNB decided to change the name of Ludlow Hall, named for the province's first chief justice and the presiding judge in the Nancy case who ruled to continue treating slavery as an issue of property rights. The reflexive reaction by opponents of removing Ludlow's name from the law school alleges that the name change is "erasing history." They contend that Ludlow was a man of his times, representative of most early nineteenth-century attitudes (Aladejebi et al. 17–33). In 1800, when the court's ruling on the Nancy case came down, Ludlow was a man out of step with the direction of British and the American societies.¹¹ By the end of the American Revolution, most northern colonies had enacted some degree of emancipation.¹² British evangelical abolitionist politician William Wilberforce had unsuccessfully introduced legislation in the House of Commons in 1791 and 1792 to abolish slavery. By 1807, legislators would agree to cooperate with the United States to ban the trans-Atlantic trade (Coffey 112,115). In neighbouring Nova Scotia, between 1785 and 1808, a steady stream of court challenges and failed pro-slavery legislation had driven a group of Digby Loyalists to petition the legislature as a last gasp to legalize slavery in the province, but that entreaty languished (Hamilton 32;

Troxler; Whitfield, *North to Bondage* 63). Notable holdouts included Prince Edward Island—the only province with the notorious claim of formally legislating slavery—Upper Canada, the American South, New Jersey, and Ludlow’s native New York.¹³

The quest for freedom would continue in the early nineteenth century through to the War of 1812 and the arrival of another wave of Blacks from the United States. During this time, Blacks faced inordinate challenges due to colonial racist ideas and racial bias. Similar to the Blacks who settled in the 1780s, new Black arrivals inhabited the poorest land and smaller portions of land than White settlers did. Often officials did not give Blacks ownership of the land but instead issued certificates of occupancy. This situation ensured that Blacks were in a position where reliance on their own farms would not provide self-sufficiency, and ensured a Black labour force for nearby White communities (Spray 68–9). The social unrest in Britain resulting from decades of war manifested itself in anti-Black resentment and the developing ideals of racial inferiority of Blacks, not only among the colonial elites, but also with the working class (Hanley). These racist attitudes left little chance for Black economic advancement; thus by the 1840s Blacks had joined the out-migration to the United States.

At this time, a young Black man by the name of Edward Bannister departed St. Andrews to become a seaman. In the early 1850s, we find him living in the Boston area and practicing as a hairdresser. He then developed his artistic skills (notably, sketching and painting) that he displayed even as a young man in St. Andrews, earning some renown as one of the pre-eminent African American artists of his time. That is not the end of the story for Bannister, however. He along with his wife Christina (Babcock) Bannister were conductors on the Underground Railroad and a supporter of the United States Colored Troops, making the Bannisters contemporaries of abolitionist titans like Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison (Bannister; Emilio et al. 24). Though Bannister has a gallery named after him in Rhode Island, you will not find a permanent acknowledgement of his accomplishments in his province of birth (Gates and Higginbotham 46–7).

Edward Bannister’s involvement with the Underground Railroad is not the only tie New Brunswick had to this secret institution. There were at least two terminals in the province, one in Bannister’s community of Slab Town in the south of the province, where there is evidence that at least one Black fugitive transited through.¹⁴ However, this southern path was under more scrutiny by Confederate sympathizers, so an even more secretive route ran through the north of the province via Fort Fairfield, Maine, and then along concealed tracks to Tomlinson Lake.¹⁵ From there, Black runaways would make their way down the valley to either settle in existing Black communities or travel further afield.

St. Andrews had another famous Black personality emerge by the name of George Braxton. During the nineteenth century, Braxton migrated from Virginia to the Boston area, where he cooked at Wellesley College before receiving chef training in Paris (Yentsch 115). By 1896, Braxton had attained the position of head chef at the prestigious Algonquin Resort, likely the first Black head chef in Canada (“Canada’s 1st African American Executive Chef”). Braxton also published a cookbook making him one of the first Blacks to do so in Canada.¹⁶

When we confront Braxton’s real achievements with the *Jemima* trope, we must confront the fact that Aunt Jemima was an image created in the minstrel tradition. The goal of this image was not to celebrate the accomplishments of men like George Braxton; the intent was to undermine them. Aunt Jemima was a caricature intended to portray Black plantation life as beneficial. This historical distortion

perpetuated the myth that naive Blacks preferred simpler lives as that was all that Blacks were intellectually capable of managing.

Looking at a few of these accomplished New Brunswick Blacks forces us to confront the Black reality. We still live in a society that will at once decry the removal of a fictional Black cook from a syrup bottle, but remain ignorant or unenthusiastic about accomplished Black chefs. We must do better at teaching these stories in secondary and post-secondary institutions in New Brunswick not only because they deserve to be known, but also because cultural ignorance is not harmless. If we take anything away from the current unrest, it is that ignorance and misinformation are powerful and they are dangerous. Recasting the Western narrative to include all aspects of slavery, emancipation, and Jim Crow will create a societal awareness that can better interpret the context surrounding New Brunswick's historic and current Black communities. The Black community is integral to the ebb and flow of Canadian and Atlantic world history. Black history matters!

To comment on this essay, please write to editorjnbs@stu.ca. **Si vous souhaitez réagir à cet essai**, veuillez soit nous écrire à editorjnbs@stu.ca.

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Notes

¹ This dual identity results in the Black consciousness of admiring Black intellectuals like W.E.B. Dubois and James Baldwin, but is often marooned in the sea of the other consciousness that advocates the worship of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and perhaps even the “I have a dream” speech of Dr. Martin Luther King.

² Black historian Henry Louis Gates Jr., himself once arrested for breaking into his own home by Cambridge, Massachusetts, police, presents the “states’ rights” argument as part of the “lost cause” revision of the American Civil War that omits the topics of slavery and post-war white supremacist terrorism. The states’ rights argument, as presented in one example of New Brunswick public history, describes Saint John as a port of call for Confederate blockade runners and thus provides distance between the port city and the issues of slavery and racism (Jack). The primary role of the historian is to approach this information critically. What did the secessionists say about their motives? South Carolina, for example, cites the rise of “anti-slavery”; Texas refers to the “abolition of Negro slavery”; Mississippi’s statement of secession states, “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery”; while Virginia declares that the reason for rebellion was “the oppression of the Southern States” (*Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union; and the Ordinance of Secession; Texas Convention* (1861) and Roberts; Mississippi, *Convention* (1861); “The Virginia Secession Ordinance”).

³ All three cases are still before the courts at the time of writing. Breonna Taylor's death in a hail of gunfire while sleeping in her bed has led to the dismissal of one Louisville police officer and a review of "no knock" warrants. International scrutiny of cell phone video capturing the murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia called into question the conduct of district attorneys in Brunswick and Waycross Judicial Circuits in not pursuing murder charges against three suspects. The new district attorney has now charged all three with murder and they have entered pleas of not guilty. The murder of George Floyd was caught on video and sparked public outrage, particularly over the fact that despite eight minutes of video capturing four police officers participating in the strangling, charges were not laid immediately and the initial coroner's report cited Floyd's death as a heart attack, neglecting to mention asphyxiation. Initially charging one Minneapolis officer with manslaughter, the courts have now levelled murder charges against all four officers.

⁴ It is full circle that we return to *Towards an African Canadian Art History* and an essay by Cheryl Thompson called "Come One, Come All": Blackface Minstrelsy as a Canadian Tradition and Early Form of Popular Culture" to explain the regressive social forces that shaped the minstrel image as a means to dehumanize Black Canadians (Nelson et al. 97-123).

⁵ James S. Macdonald described Black Loyalists and Black Refugees in Nova Scotia as "improvident and indolent" and a "curse to the province." Colonel Edward Winslow referred to the impoverished Black arrivals as "an unfortunate set of Blackies" (Winslow 40; Macdonald 293).

⁶ The basis of Nancy Morton's challenge to slavery can be found in Ward Chipman's *Slavery Brief* that challenges the institution on the basis of its civility, its incompatibility with Christianity, and the fact that "natural law" and the law of England did not recognize it.

⁷ Throughout the 1790s, it became increasingly more difficult to assert slave ownership in Nova Scotia, as a steady stream of court cases suing for manumission shifted the onus of proof to the alleged slave "owner"; by 1808 a petition to legalize slavery wallowed in the Nova Scotia legislature. The Massachusetts legislature received a number of petitions for freedom mirroring patriot complaints decrying liberty from colonial bondage leading up to the outbreak of war. These Black petitioners were likely encouraged by the wording of the ruling of *Somerset v Smith* that found slavery to be incompatible with English common law.

⁸ One of Granville Sharp's disciples, John Clarkson, was instrumental in organizing and leading Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to settle Sierra Leone. Clarkson's journal chronicles the lives of Black Loyalists in the Maritimes during the late 1780s and early 1790s.

⁹ Several of Thomas Peters's petitions are available from the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick and a description of Peters's journey to London in 1790 and his petitioning of William Pitt's government can be found in *Epic Journeys of Freedom Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* by Cassandra Pybus (*Petition of Thomas Peters* [n.d.], Brinley Town; *Petition of Thomas Peters*, 18 March 1790, Fredericton; *Petition of Thomas Peters*, 18 April 1790 [n.p.]).

¹⁰ Henry Beverhout's life bridges the established Moravian churches in the early eighteenth-century Caribbean and the establishment of dissenting churches on the continent. John Catron illustrates the significance of the African American presence in the early American church and religious ties binding the Caribbean and the Southern states before the American Revolution in *Evangelical Networks in the Greater Caribbean and the Origins of the Black Church*. Caribbean church leaders like Beverhout established a culture of lay preaching in the Carolinas and Georgia, leading to elevation of preachers like David George, who was instrumental in the growth of the Baptist church in Georgia, and continued to do so after the Black Loyalists migrated to British North America, and eventually to Africa. This journey is chronicled in his memoirs.

¹¹ For a succinct discussion of Ludlow's career and how he was already an anachronism in his own times on a number of social issues besides the legality of slavery, see Richard Yeomans, "History is Not a Shield for Ludlow."

¹² William L. Clements Library hosts a timeline of emancipation of individual American states, with links to selected primary documents. By the end of the American Revolution, Vermont (1777), Massachusetts (1783), and Pennsylvania (gradual emancipation beginning in 1780) had effectively ended slavery.

¹³ Ken Donovan has traced the origins of slavery in what would become Prince Edward Island. Subsequent control by the English and the imposition of the draconian form of slavery we attribute to the American South is presented in work by Jim Hornby, Amani Whitfield, and Barry Cahill. In *Inhuman Bondage*, David Davis relates that New York and New Jersey in 1770 had 19,062 and 10,460 slaves, respectively, and compared to Massachusetts's slave population of 4,754, both New York and New Jersey are exceptional in their ties to slavery. Another expression of this relationship with the peculiar institution is its persistence well into the nineteenth century. New York carried out gradual emancipation between 1799 and 1828, and New Jersey was the last northern state to begin its gradual emancipation in 1804. In *Black Bondage in the North*, Edgar McManus discusses how slavery continued in New Jersey up to the American Civil War. In *Trading in Jersey Souls*, James J. Gigantino II reveals that New Jersey continued to supply slaves into Louisiana after emancipation, and the actions of the slave ring run by Judge Jacob Van Wickle show New Jersians were prepared to maintain slavery by fair means or foul.

¹⁴ An unnamed Black settler in Green Hill, New Brunswick, described his crossing of the Passamaquoddy River from Robbiston, Maine, located directly across the river from Slab Town, St. Andrews's Black community.

¹⁵ Especially during the period before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, a variety of vested interests were aligned with the Southern cause. As historian John Boyko has pointed out, many Saint Johners were openly supportive of the Confederacy. Work by Ruth and Art Mraz identified Friends Church in Fort Fairfield, Maine, as a launching point for Blacks to cross the border into New Brunswick to Tomlinson Lake where William Tomlinson welcomed them and prepared them for the journey downriver.

¹⁶ George Braxton's cookbook is still available on Amazon.

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